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Abstract

This paper explores the intergenerational media practice pedagogy at work in the Generation Animation project. Using a participatory action research (PAR) methodology this project developed out of a small community in Northern Ireland. In this post-conflict community, the project aimed to make space for children's voices. The project sits in a specific post-conflict context known as 'Shared Education'. In this context, primary school pupils from schools divided along denominational and sectarian geographies come together as a means of learning and understanding the other. When teachers from two such schools approached Ulster University to support them in developing a program of digital animation for their (8–10-year-old) pupils, an intergenerational learning environment was established which included staff from the primary schools, students and staff from the university and the primary school pupils. The PAR approach enabled the facilitation of learning through media practice (animation) as these pupils used the animated screen space to explore the UNICEF Rights of the Child. This paper offers an examination of the complex pedagogical interplay at work between the key participants and offers insights and conclusions on the impact of the PAR on the participants and the wider community.

Introduction

This paper explores the intergenerational media practice pedagogy at work in the Generation Animation project. Using a participatory action research (PAR) methodology, this project developed out of a small community in Northern Ireland. In this post-conflict community, in a small divided country, the project aimed to make space for children's voices. The project sits in a specific post-conflict context known as 'Shared Education'. In this context, primary school pupils from schools divided along denominational and sectarian geographies come together as a means of learning and understanding the other. When teachers from two such schools approached Ulster University to support them in developing a program of digital animation for their (8–10-year-old) pupils, an intergenerational learning environment was established which included staff from the primary schools, students and staff from the university and the primary school pupils. The PAR approach

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enabled the facilitation of learning through media practice (animation) as these pupils used the animated screen space to explore the UNICEF Rights of the Child. This paper offers an examination of the complex pedagogical interplay at work between the key participants and offers insights and conclusions on the impact of the PAR on the participants and the wider community. The *Screenworks* publication offers specific textual analysis and insights from the media practice work developed by this intergenerational learning community. (Hickey 2020)

Context

With only 7% of children in Northern Ireland attending integrated schools (Department of Education 2019), 'the majority of young people in Northern Ireland continue to be educated in schools where the vast majority of their peers are drawn from the same community' (Gallagher 2016). As Integrated Education provision stalled the emergent 'Shared Education' approach evolved as a way to approach integration while still allowing schools to maintain their denomination as Gallagher explains;

> the new model sought to use network effects to promote positive interdependencies, directly encouraging sustained connections across the denominational divide by having students take classes in each other's schools, and teachers teaching in each other's schools. (Gallagher 2016)

Before this project, both schools were already engaged in Shared Education activities, visiting each other, engaging in ice-breakers, workshops and sports activities and for many of the children, that was the first time in the vicinity of each other.

Geography

The participants in the Generation Animation project have a very specific geography. The project took place on the Coleraine Campus of Ulster University which sits in a rural site on the outskirts of the town of Coleraine in Northern Ireland. The two schools that participated in the project were Millburn Primary School and St Malachy's Primary School. These schools are 1.1 miles apart. However, within this small, walkable distance, very little engagement and integration of communities happens as Roulston et al. explain

> in Northern Ireland, specifically in the town of Coleraine, divisions within a society emerging from 30 years of violence impact on the movement and mobility of young people. (Roulston et al. 2016)

In effect, the community is segregated along religious lines; 'we have different populations attending schools in the same small town, but developing very different geographies as they navigate their environments' (Roulston et al. 2016). The wider Shared Education program, undertaken across Northern Ireland, is tackling similar segregated geographies from town to town.

The already segregated geographies of these pupils are further complicated by deprivation. In an attempt to compare the quality of life for people living in the 11 Council areas of Northern Ireland, The Detail, an investigative news and analysis website, ranked the quality of life in each Council area based on indicators such as unemployment figures, median earnings, pupils entitled to free school meals and life expectancy, among others

(Campbell 2015). In 2015, the Causeway Coast and Glens Council area, where these schools are situated, ranked 8th out of 11 for quality of life in Northern Ireland. In the 2017 Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (ninis2.nisra.gov.uk 2019), an even more comprehensive study, the areas in which these schools are situated were both assessed in the bottom half of the league tables for deprivation in the Education, Skills and Training domain. The ranking in this domain is assessed by a comprehensive range of performance indicators including, absenteeism at Primary and Post-Primary School, proportion of school leavers not achieving five or more GCSE's A*-C, proportion of those leaving school at 16, 17 and 18 not entering Education, Employment or Training, proportion of 18–21 year olds who have not enrolled in Higher Education Courses at Higher or Further Education establishments and proportions of working age adults (25–64) with no or low levels of qualification. These statistics demonstrate that the lived experience for many of these pupils and their families will be challenging socio-economic conditions that can have a direct effect on their educational attainment. Millburn Primary School and St Malachy's Primary School are 1.2 and 1.9 miles respectively, from the University campus and yet these figures show how difficult it has been for children from these areas to achieve a place at University. Working with these pupils in these contexts, the teachers at the schools reached out to the University for support. The community, through the teachers, had taken the first steps to engaging in the project.

Participatory action research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) starts with a community. In this case, the community is 8–10-year old children living in a segregated community in areas that suffer from deprivation, particularly in the Education, Skills and Training domain. Mulroy notes that 'researchers have found that multiple methods, from a logic model to PAR, are usually essential to meet the needs expressed by community participants' (Mulroy 2004). The schools had a specific need to engage with children's rights which is embedded in their ethos and provided an important subject for the shared education of the children.

Both schools are 'UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools' which means that both schools place The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child at the centre of their curriculum. Working together, the teachers had identified a lack of opportunity for their pupils to engage in contemporary media-making, specifically digital animation. Initially, the teachers approached the University for support from the media department to help teach the pupils how to develop animated content on iPads. Through discussions about the subject of the animated content, the teachers and university staff discovered the opportunity for the pupils to tell the story of their rights from their perspective, through animated stories. The community (represented by the teachers), together with academic and widening access staff at the University, had originated and defined the research to be undertaken. In doing so, the community widened to include staff from the University and our undergraduate media students.

Methodology

Knowing that the teachers wanted to use animation as creative media practice to help the children tell the stories about their rights led to the development of the methodology. The

methodology for this project included onsite weekly observations, digital field notes using Basecamp, video and photographic recordings of the children working together with students and staff on their projects, semi-structured group interviews with children as they finished their projects and semi-structured interviews with staff and students as the project drew to a close.

> Lacking a distinctive academic community intent on demarcating the boundaries of the discipline, PAR practitioners have had the freedom to pursue a wide variety of creative approaches to research and call it 'PAR'. Like many artists and activists, PAR practitioners do not use a single methodology, but rather a set of hybrid practices suited to the specific circumstances in which communities find themselves. (Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez 2018)

The freedom to develop the methodology alongside the teachers and children was essential as it allowed space to facilitate the needs of the teachers, who valued the opportunity to get support in teaching using creative technologies, and the voices of the children, who were free to develop their stories throughout the project. However, developing a methodology in this way is for some academics both alien and risky, so much so that;

> Fine suggests that, at the present time, critical PAR can only exist in 'fugitive spaces' and that many have, therefore, given up on the academy as a space of radical possibility. (Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez 2018)

And yet, in this project, we brought the PAR work onto the campus, into the classrooms and lecture halls of the academy. The most liberating element of PAR is its challenge to conventional power structures and intellectual elitism, in other words, only a PAR methodology would allow local children a space and place in a University to determine their own learning about their rights through media practice.

In agreement with the teachers and principals of both schools, the project was setup to run for 3 h per week, for 6 weeks on Wednesday afternoons on the University Campus. For most of these children, this was the first time they had been on the University Campus which became a neutral space, apart from both communities. The first week entailed an introductory welcome 'lecture' in an effort to welcome and embed the children as participants in the University. The short talk explained to the children how large the University is; 4 campuses, over 26,000 students, and over 2000 staff. The children were told that when they were on campus they would be our students to give them a sense of belonging. This induction lecture also explained the 'Rules of the University', adapted from the student charter which laid out expectations for the children when on campus. The lecture also included an outline of the 6 week program and how that would begin with meeting the student mentors. The lecture ended with an explanation of Stop-Motion Animation with two examples for the pupils to get a sense of the genre. Following that the photographs of the students went up on the screen with the names of the children who they would mentor underneath so they could establish groups and proceed to the first introductory animation session.

The use of the University to facilitate this kind of PAR is important. It is important for the children who might aspire to one day go there, important for the students who often do their work in isolation, to obtain a grade and progress through their undergraduate degree, and important for PAR itself. As researchers, we are responsible for our choice of methodology. It has been argued that;

engaged approaches in general, and PAR in particular, do not fit comfortably with values that embrace competition and individualism, which are increasingly dominant in Western academia. (Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez 2018)

Competition and individualism are symptomatic of looking inward. If academics feel at odds with those values, then they must use their considerable privilege and influence to ensure that they look outward, to engage wider communities and stakeholders in our Universities. In the Generation Animation project, animation became the method of engagement for the children.

In this project, the children used stop-motion animation techniques, using an iPad to capture the movement of characters and to record their voices for narration and other sound effects. Collectively, this confluence of art (piecing together backgrounds, cutting out characters, drawing speech bubbles and text) filmmaking, (scriptwriting, storyboarding, capturing shots) and technology (image storage, sound manipulation and non-linear digital editing) became a way to engage the children in understanding their rights.

> The potential for using artistic methods within any research is considerable. They can be successfully employed to engage with people to create moments of exchange and reflection and offer a space that is at one point ordinary and at another extraordinary. (Pool 2018)

Pool's 'ordinariness' in the artistic exchange is evident across the project. Ordinary children, supervised by their usual teachers, using ordinary technology. The 'extraordinariness' comes in different forms. The shared education context, the partnership with the undergraduate students, the colonisation of the University spaces and resources, the outward communication of the project and the freedom to learn through artistic practice. These sites of extraordinariness are explored below.

In PAR, part of the challenge to Western academia and the dominant hierarchies and methodologies preferred by the academy is the extent to which PAR researchers are involved in the research.

> In choosing critical PAR as an approach, practitioners may be forced to challenge the forces in higher education that keep scholarship 'objective' (mystifying), 'non-political' (non-subversive) and 'academic'(elitist). (James and Gordon cited in Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez 2018)

In this project, the PAR was married with animation as an arts practice. Arts practices as research methodologies have also had to fight for their place in Academic circles and in doing so questioned the validity of the detached academic, objectively drawing conclusions about the subject of their research.

> Several influences have informed the notion of 'standpoint epistemologies' or 'situated knowledge' in which it proves untenable simply to assume the privilege of neutrality and objectivity of viewpoint. (Nelson 2013)

The dissolution of the boundaries between the community and University and the subject and object of the research undertaken open up a space to uncover and begin to understand the situated knowledge at play in the artistic practice of animation. The mediated screen space of the iPad allows the children and students their place to make meaning, allowing a form of praxis that has the potential for impactful, meaningful engagement.

> In Haseman's formulation, artistic praxis is 'performative' in that it impacts upon us, does something to us, changes us in all manner of ways (aesthetically, perceptually, ethically, emotionally, even physically). (Haseman cited in Nelson 2013)

The on-campus weekly engagement in animation practice was performative and experiential and it impacted the children and undergraduate students in ways unforeseen before the project started as Henderson argues;

> Collaboration requires face-to-face interaction between embodied subjects in shared physical space, and because collaborative relations are embodied they are not just about mind: they are about bodily sensations and emotions too. (Henderson 2004)

The embodied and the emotional animation practice that took place during the project is analysed in the accompanying dialogic *Screenworks* article as the final part of the methodology. Skains argues 'Combination of methodological approaches, therefore, provides a more robust approach to examination of creative practice than reflection or post-textual analysis provide on their own.' (Skains 2018) The *Screenworks* paper is a textual analysis of the storytelling done by the children. This analysis offers conclusions regarding the way the children chose to portray their rights through representations of children, adults, teachers, school, and the problems they encounter. Through this adjunct textual analysis, I hope to offer an analysis of the children's practice work and with it, an understanding of their lived experiences. This paper continues with the analysis of the facilitation of the media practice at work by the undergraduate students.

Students as mentors

The role of the undergraduate students in Generation Animation was significant as they became facilitators, co-teachers and researchers. 'Teaching and learning models used by artist educators are non-didactic and participatory with artists assuming the role of facilitator and co-learner' (Henderson 2004). In 2016, the project engaged 82 children and in 2017, 87 children. In order to facilitate the large number of children in the project, undergraduate students from the Interactive Media and Media Production degree programmes at Ulster University volunteered to work on the project. 15 students volunteered in 2016 and 20 students in 2017. Both years, the children had already been grouped together in inter-school teams by their teachers and had already been engaged in learning about their rights through visits to both schools. The undergraduate students were then assigned groups of children to mentor through the animation project. Each student worked with between 3 and 6 children to help facilitate the animation production. In a sense, the students became co-researchers using their media practice skills and abilities to facilitate the animation work. The students were an essential part of the formation of a partnership learning community.

> Partnership learning communities are fostered through structures and processes that support partnership relationships, members of the community developing shared values and enacting these through attitudes and behavior. (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014)

The students welcomed the children into their learning community and engaged them in their subject, (media), teaching, instructing and inspiring them to write, develop and make their own stories come to life on the iPads.

It is worth highlighting that it is very hard to 'see' partnership as a process when it is committed to paper. It is essentially experiential. Therefore, it is also useful to reflect on partnership through experience. (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014)

As part of the PAR methodology, the students, teachers and children were asked to reflect on their experience as the Generation Animation project ended. The student responses were recorded and are available at: https://vimeo.com/214691740 The student reflections on their own experiences working with the children offer insights on how they have been impacted by the project. Some of the students mentioned their own love of working with children. In her interview, Kathryn reflected on how she felt it was important for her to pass on to the children a love for media-making and using technology;

What encouraged me the most to sign up for this was because I have worked with kids in the past and done kids clubs and I know the excitement that they bring and how fun it can be. When Adrian was explaining how we get to teach them how to use iPads and teach them animation and how I love to do that I thought it would be a great opportunity to teach kids and how fun that would be. (Kathryn, https://vimeo.com/214691740#t=45s)

A number of students echoed that working with the children would be fun in itself. In her interview, Heather discussed how that was a motivator for joining the project. She felt that the give and take between her and the children had enhanced her own learning. She also identified the notion of 'community' coming through in the stories the children told in their animation work too;

Whenever I was on the (undergraduate) course and I realized that this was an opportunity that came to me, I jumped at it because I love working with kids. The kids here enhanced my learning as well because we bounced off each other … and them coming from different schools as well, they got on very well and there was a lot of community within their stories. (Heather, https://vimeo.com/214691740#t=1:23s)

Some students had volunteered to work on the project in both 2016 and 2017. Conor explained in his interview how he wanted to support other students by sharing his knowledge and experience;

This is my second year doing Generation Animation. I decided to come back and do it again because I enjoyed it the first year and I thought it was a really great experience. So, I decided to further my skills and apply them to the second year with newer students coming through and also guiding them through how we done it last year and sharing my experience. (Conor, https://vimeo.com/214691740#t=1:50s)

David reflected on specific components of the program that had directly affected him; 'I think my communication skills have improved, being able to relay ideas to the children and work with them to gather ideas.' (David, https://vimeo.com/214691740#t=1:23s) And Claudia realised how the project benefitted both the wider community and the student experience simultaneously;

I believe that Generation Animation has greatly enhanced my experience as, aside from it being of great benefit to the community, it has been of great benefit for us to be able say that we participated in teaching primary school kids. (Claudia, https://vimeo.com/214691740#t=2:13s)

These reflections offer insights from those closest to the children during the project. Ulster University has a successful, targeted approach to recruiting students from widening access backgrounds. (Osborne 2006) All students involved in the project were native to Northern Ireland. It is therefore possible that they share similar background geographies and socio-economic conditions to the children they were working with. It is perhaps through intergenerational empathy, that they reveal a real sense of love for the project, the media practice and the technology which enabled them to work so closely with the children. In their work with the children they have also supported each other to achieve remarkable outcomes within the learning community they have formed. Their own skills have been impacted from developing an understanding of the children and their needs to developing the self-reflectiveness necessary to analyse and discuss their progress through the project. Their ability to communicate this progress to camera is part of their progress but also part of the wider communication of the project.

Communication

In Fals Borda's (1995) formula for PAR, he implored researchers to

> diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals. (Fals Borda 1995)

While the Generation Animation project opened the doors of the University to the children and their teachers, it was important that the ongoing experience of working there was communicated to the community. Often, widening access programs and open days offer a brief glimpse of the academy and celebrate the engagement done on those days with an image on the University news website or a tweet on the University Twitter page. However, for Generation Animation, as a PAR project, we opened up each step of the process to try and engage the wider community including parents, grandparents, other family members and other pupils in both schools. The centrepiece of the communication was the website, available at www.generationanimation.co.uk and for year 2 www.generationanimation2017.co.uk. The website was mobile friendly so parents could view it on their phones and the URL was circulated to parents via school communications including parent newsletters and on the schools' own websites.

After each animation session, the students would upload the animation work in progress to the website to enable the pupils to share it with their parents, siblings and wider family. For child protection reasons, the website was organised by images of the undergraduate students which allowed the pupils to find their work without publishing the names of the children. This gave each undergraduate student facilitator and their team of pupils their own webpage to publish their work. The final animation productions were then published on the webpage after the screening showcase. The website became an archive of the production milestones from each week and every single child can chart their progress through the project on their own webpage. As the animation production progressed the undergraduate students also taught the pupils how to upload, write and post their own video work on their webpages, as a further digital literacy skill that happened serendipitously rather than by design.

The final week was a cinematic showcase screening event on the University campus which was designed to further communicate the project to the wider community. The largest lecture theatre on the Coleraine campus was turned into a cinema for the event and we supplied popcorn and drinks to make the cinematic experience more authentic, celebratory and rewarding for the children (and the undergraduate students). Parents were invited to attend and celebrate the work of their children. The goal of the screening was to further engage the wider community and to open up the University as a shared space to see and to share the animation work. As part of the ongoing field work and research observation, footage of the children working together across the project had been captured. When introducing the project to the parents before the screening of the animation work, it was possible to show them 'behind the scenes' by playing an edited compilation of video clips of the undergraduate students and their children working together, available at https://vimeo.com/168011989. This allowed us to communicate to them a sense of how their children had been working in a busy, creative and shared environment that led to the animated work they could see online and in the cinematic showcase.

As the project originated with the teachers, as leaders of their community, we invited them to come forward to offer their reflections on the program. They agreed to record their responses to camera, so that we could embed them in the website and allow the wider community access to their evaluations.

Across the responses from teaching staff at both schools were widespread praise for the undergraduate students. Tony Fisher, Head Teacher at St Malachy's Primary School, highlighted how closely the students worked with the children and how they had an impact on their behavior and focus;

> The students have been very, very helpful. They have worked closely with the young children, the pupils. They have set high standards for them. They look after their behavior if they find they are misbehaving as well. They also insure that they stay on task which is lovely to see. (Tony Fisher, Principal, St Malachy's Primary School, https://vimeo.com/168016881#t=47s)

Both teachers from St Malachy's referred to the project as an 'opportunity'. Reflecting on this as the first opportunity to work with students, Tony Fisher discussed how the students had considerably accelerated the learning progress for the children;

> It's been fantastic being at Ulster University. It's the first opportunity we have actually had for the children to sit down with a group of students and actually complete work which probably would've lasted at least one term if not, possible even two terms and we have managed to complete that within five or six weeks. (Tony Fisher, Principal, St Malachy's Primary School, https://vimeo.com/168016881#t=1:30s)

Catherine Glackin, P4/5 Teacher from St Malachy's Primary School acknowledged how welcome the staff and children felt at the University and, how the children enjoyed being involved in the project which echoes the student responses about the 'fun' elements of working with children.

> All the students and all the staff have been really easy to work with and really, really welcomed us. The children have absolutely loved the opportunity to come to the University and they have really enjoyed it. (Catherine Glackin, P4/5 Teacher, St Malachy's Primary School, https://vimeo.com/168016881#t=1:07s)

The teaching staff from both schools referred directly to the shared aspects of the project. Petula Francis, Classroom Assistant, Millburn Primary School explained how she could see value in sharing across the project which allowed the children to learn about each other:

> I think the cross-community project's been really valuable to the children because they've mixed really well, they've learned lots of different things from each other's different schools and what they do in and out of school and the children have made lots of new friends. (Petula Francis, Classroom Assistant, Millburn Primary School, https://vimeo.com/168016881#t=2:48s)

Catherine Glackin, P4/5 Teacher from St Malachy's Primary School echoed how valuable the shared education approach was, privileging the educational experience above the animation work;

> It's been really, really valuable even as a Shared Education project with the children coming together and learning to work together and get on well and build friendships. It's been wonderful. And then, along with the animation side to it too. (Catherine Glackin, P4/5 Teacher, St Malachy's Primary School, https://vimeo.com/168016881#t=2:35s)

Brendan Finnegan, P6 Teacher, Millburn Primary School summed up the project and the unified goal as potentially life changing for the children in the project;

> I think we all have a shared goal and that is to achieve success in later life and that is a goal we are trying to realise for the pupils involved in this program regardless of religious affiliation or whatever background they may come from. (Brendan Finnegan, P6 Teacher, Millburn Primary School, https://vimeo.com/168016881#t=3:01s)

It is clear from the responses of the teaching staff at the schools that they viewed the project as an opportunity, that they value shared education activity and that they valued the undergraduate students inputs both creatively and pedagogically. Finnegan's assessment of the project as an opportunity to engage these children in activities that can help them achieve success in later life reflects the ambition of PAR itself. His reflection on the achievement over religious affiliation or background perhaps reflects a wider feeling in the community, which was acknowledged in Borooah and Knox's paper;

> a networked approach is established offering mutual cross-community support. Parents endorse such collaboration because it improves the quality of their children's education, and who the provider is, becomes less important to them. (Fishkin et al., cited in Borooah and Knox 2012)

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there is an excellent opportunity for the amalgamation media practice as part of the methodology of PAR. The media practice work undertaken and analysed in the accompanying dialogic *Screenworks* article reveals new insights from the children on the program. The use of PAR in challenging social contexts where intricate boundaries exist across segregated and partisan communities is ever evolving. The use of the University as a shared facilitation space that allows for neutral territory in which to explore shared social issues is important, especially at a time when some academics argue that PAR work can't be currently done in the academy. The communication of

the ongoing project and the efforts made to bring the wider community into the University to share and celebrate the work of the children are important in the continuing relationship with communities adjacent to the University. The role of the undergraduate students was vital and the serendipitous learning on their part came through in their interviews which proved the value in the formation of the intergenerational learning partnership. Finally, I suggest, that in a context in which shared education was deemed to be important across the denominational divide, that future shared education projects consider pursuing the intergenerational alongside the interdenominational.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Adrian Hickey is currently a lecturer Interactive Media at Ulster University. Hickey was course director for the Interactive Media BSc program at Ulster University from 2013 to 2019. Hickey has a range of skills in using new media technologies to engage end users with media content. At Ulster University he has completed a range of media projects that focus on using augmented reality, animation and digital design to enhance user experience and engagement. Much of Hickey's ongoing research is practiced based and community focused. Hickey is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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